

## Sunday School

### THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM.

Acts 15: 1-5, 22-29.

Lesson For May 23, 1909.

**GOLDEN TEXT.**—"We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved, even as they."—Acts 15: 11.

#### SHORTER CATECHISM.

Q. 56. What is the reason annexed to the third commandment?

A. The reason annexed to the third commandment is, that however the breakers of this commandment may escape punishment from men, yet the Lord our God will not suffer them to escape His righteous judgment.

#### DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—Acts 15: 1-11.

T.—Acts 15: 12-21.

W.—Acts 15: 22-35.

Th.—Matt. 23: 1-13.

F.—Gal. 2: 1-10.

S.—Gal. 5: 1-14.

S.—Gal. 6: 7-18.

#### TOPICAL OUTLINE.

The First General Assembly—

How it came about, vs. 1-6.

The speeches, vs. 6-21.

The decision, vs. 22-29.

#### LESSON COMMENT.

##### The Route of Travel.

We noticed last week that Paul, instead of turning south from Derbe to Tarsus, went westwardly through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, in Pisidia, to comfort the disciples and ordain elders in every church. From Antioch he went south to Perga, thence to Attalia, the seaport of Perga, and thence by ship back to Seleucia and Antioch, in Syria. Why this return? Why should they not have pressed on into Phrygia and Galatia and Troas? We do not certainly know. But several suggestions are possible: 1. The Holy Ghost called them back by means of some instrumentality or other, in order that the proper preparations for the work of Foreign Missions might be completed, before the work should be pushed farther. The important question of the relations which the Gentile believers should bear to the Mosaic law, must be settled before the work could be vigorously prosecuted. God knew exactly what that decision ought to be.

2. The instrumentality which directed them homeward is unknown to us. It may have been the loneliness which comes over the missionary as he labors in distant lands; it may have been health broken by the excitement of the perils met and by the stoning. It may have been that they felt a doubt about the proper treatment of the Gentile converts and wanted the advice of others.

##### The Issue.

But certain converted Pharisees, in Antioch, began a criticism upon the Apostles. These argued that these converted Gentiles ought to have been required to observe the Mosaic law, circumcision, the annual feasts, and the sacrifices, when they were admitted into the Christian Church. Their dogmas went farther: "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved." They argued that circumcision was both obligatory on the converts, and essential to salvation.

Just here we have an illustration of human nature: 1. Men love the ceremonials of religion, and are apt to become so much attached to them as to exalt them to an equality with piety itself. Sometimes we suspect our Episcopal brethren of erring in this way, and loving the "Church service" too much. But while we can see the errors of others, we may perhaps be at fault in this regard ourselves. Sometimes we become so much attached to our mode of holding communion, to our

mode of preaching, or of baptizing that we can not see the excellence of the customs of others. Sometimes we become so much interested in arguing the doctrines of election and perseverance, that we overlook the necessity of a new heart.

2. Where the attachment to ceremonials is not so great as this, still there is danger that we may become so attached to one church building, or to one pew, or to one hymn-book, or to one preacher, or to one form of worship, that we can not worship satisfactorily in any other place or circumstances. "Neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem," is the only place of worship, but they that worship God should worship him anywhere in spirit and in truth.

##### The Settlement.

Instead of holding a protracted meeting which should sunder the church, they called a council to decide the matter. To this council they seemed to have called all the apostles who were accessible, and a great company of elders from all the churches. See verse 3. The churches of Phoenicia and Samaria were notified of the council. I do not know whether to call this assemblage a Synod or a General Assembly. It certainly was a court of appeals for the disputants of Antioch. Our Presbyterian Synods are constituted just like this, by an assemblage of elders. (As the apostles are long since dead, of course we can not have their help in our Synods.) It is noticeable that in the deliberations of the Council, the apostles deliberated, not in their character as inspired apostles, able to decide the issue by inspiration, but in their character as elders. They did not undertake to settle the question as a prophet would, "by authority," but they argued the question on an equality with fellow-elders. I apprehend that God caused them to do it thus, in order to set before us an example of the manner in which our Synods and Assemblies ought to deliberate. Let us learn from that council, and have none in our church courts who shall be lords over God's heritage.

One phrase demands our attention. "When there had been much disputing, Peter rose up." There was a free discussion. And the apostles refrained from speaking until the younger elders had been heard. If we would observe this custom in our Presbyteries, ruling elders would take more interest in attending.

##### The Arguments.

We have three arguments reported. 1. That of Peter. God told me to go and preach to the Gentiles (v. 7). God gave them (v. 8) the gift of the Holy Ghost and acknowledged them as his people without circumcision. God purified their hearts by faith (v. 9) without circumcision, the sign of purification. If you compel them to observe the Mosaic law, you will tempt them to try after salvation by works, (v. 10) and this is a yoke that they can not bear. And (v. 11) as they and we are both saved by grace, not by ceremonies, it is not necessary to impose these ceremonies on them. The address came happily from Peter the Apostle to the Jews.

Paul and Barnabas argued that the success of their work, and God's endorsement of it by miracles, proved that they were not doing wrong. James summed up the argument by telling them that all this is in accordance with the prophecies (Amos 9: 11, 12) which foretold the salvation of the Gentiles. Then he advised this conclusion: that we insist upon their observing those ceremonies which have a ground work in moral obligation. God made these prohibitions to Noah long before the days of Moses—prohibitions against participation in idolatry, fornication, blood and things strangled.

The council approved this action, and thus was settled for all time the ritual of the Christian Church. From that time it has had no earthly priests, no earthly sacrifices, no earthly temple, no ceremonies, except those of the New Testament. Yet men clung to ceremonies in spite of the decision, and as late as the year 300 A. D., the pass-over feast was observed by many individual Christians.